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The Attitude of Undergraduate Students Towards Plagiarism: The Case of Bindura University of Science Education.

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Abstract

The extent of plagiarism has been rising globally and many universities are trying hard to eradicate this practice. The challenge is being exacerbated by the availability of information due to technological advancements such as the Internet. Researchers and students become exposed to too much information but sometimes disregard the copyright and intellectual issues surrounding use of such. This exposure has contributed to the rise in plagiarism. Students at universities have had difficulties in understanding plagiarism and avoiding it. While most effort has been on designing detection tools and punitive measures, there has been little research on why students practice plagiarism particularly in countries such as Zimbabwe. This study aims at finding out the main reasons behind plagiarism. The study was carried out at Bindura University of Science Education, a university in Zimbabwe, Southern Africa. A qualitative approach was taken. Data was gathered through use of Document Analysis and group of fifty (50) interviews were conducted with undergraduate students. Results revealed that students have both limited and low awareness of plagiarism and some of the reasons for plagiarism noted include poor academic writing skills, external pressure, lack of referencing convention skills and lack of plagiarism awareness as some of the main

reasons behind plagiarism. These findings will help on potential strategies that can be taken to reduce or minimise plagiarism at the specific university under which the study was undertaken.

Keywords: Plagiarism, Higher Education, Undergraduate Students, Academic Integrity

Introduction

Academic integrity has been one of the core values of institutions of higher learning. Such ethical issues has surrounded discussions around 21st higher education. Institutions have crafted different policies to try and safeguard their integrity. However, such integrity becomes heavily compromised when students plagiarise. This plagiarising has been on the rise in most African countries. It is therefore worth exploring the main reasons or attitude towards plagiarism.

There are various definition of plagiarism in literature. But the main points emanating from such definitions indicate that plagiarism is unacknowledged copying of information from different materials. This is a serious offence that would be compared to theft or shoplifting. It has a serious impact towards the reputation of an institution if it is not controlled. Since many institutions are worried of academic integrity, this study is significant in that it helps to bring in one of the main reasons why students plagiarise and brings in the extent of students' understanding of various forms of plagiarism. The study contribute to a thus-far relatively under researched area in Zimbabwe.

Research Objectives

The main aim of this research was to look at the attitude and practices of undergraduate students towards plagiarism: The main objectives were:

1. To find out the extent of students' awareness of plagiarism
2. To find out the extent of students' familiarity with citation and referencing conventions?
3. To explore factors influencing students to plagiarise.
4. To identify possible measure of reducing plagiarism

Literature Review

Plagiarism is a sub-category of academic dishonesty. There seem to be no consensus on the definition of plagiarism or what should constitute the concept (Chireshe, 2014). Resultantly, there is no single definition of the concept. Ereta and Gokmenoglua (2010) regard plagiarism as “literary theft”, while Sankar (2020) describes it as the unauthorised or unacknowledged use of another person's academic or scholarly work. Devlin and Gray (2007) note that what is regarded as plagiarism is the use of someone's work without appropriate acknowledgement. Thus, the use of someone's ideas or work without proper attribution to the original author, and presenting the work as if it is one's own becomes plagiarism. Burrus, McGoldrick and Schuhmann (2007) also note that terms such as ‘examination malpractice,’ ‘cheating,’ and ‘dishonesty’ are used interchangeably, which may contribute to the differing understandings of academic dishonesty that exist between faculty members and students. Plagiarism has been rampant in most academic institutions world over, notwithstanding the lack of a single incisive definition of the concept. Owing to the numerous dangers that are posed by plagiarism, many researches have been conducted in it to increase understanding in attempt to curb the malpractice that has bedevilled the academia.

Ereta and Gokmenoglua (2010) conducted a quantitative research on mostly doctoral students at Middle East Technical University (METU) in Turkey. The study was mainly to establish the students' views and knowledge about plagiarism; as well as to expose the factors that lead academics to plagiarise. The researchers (ibid) established that whilst most of the research participants shunned plagiarism, factors such as use of a foreign language, lack of knowledge, time constraints, among others usually lead students to plagiarise. Whilst the above research was conducted on career academics (doctoral students at METU, Turkey) to establish their attitude and level of knowledge on plagiarism, the current study is a largely qualitative study targeted on bachelors' students at BUSE in Zimbabwe. Over and above exploring the BUSE students' attitude towards, and knowledge of plagiarism, this study shall explore the students' levels of familiarity with referencing conventions and anti-plagiarism software.

Chireshe (2014) studied academic dishonesty in Zimbabwean higher education institutions (HEIs) on a broad spectrum. The study included plagiarism, copying of other students' work, fabricating information sources, examination cheating, feigning illness (or other such predicaments) to justify truancy, among others. Whereas the mentioned study explores many forms of academic dishonesty in Zimbabwe, this study zeroes in on plagiarism vis-à-vis BUSE students' attitude and knowledge of the phenomenon. The current study further attempts to assess learners' familiarity with referencing

conventions and also establishes complementary measures that could be used by the university to curb the increasing academic scourge.

Park (2003: p.475) lists four main ways noted in literature as ways how students plagiarise:

- Stealing material from another source and passing it off as their own;
- Submitting a paper written by someone else (e.g. a peer or relative) and passing it off as their own;
- Copying sections of material from one or more source texts, supplying proper documentation (including the full reference) but leaving out quotation marks, thus giving the impression that the material has been paraphrased rather than directly quoted;
- Paraphrasing material from one or more source texts without supplying appropriate documentation.

There are various forms of academic dishonesty. Bettaieb et al. (2020) notes that academic misconduct in the sciences is mainly due to data falsification and fabrication while in the social sciences it is mainly on language for justifying claims and argumentation. Brateg (2013) notes that of all these forms of dishonesty, plagiarism is considered as the worst form of academic and research dishonesty that threaten honest contribution to knowledge creation.

Reasons on why students plagiarise vary. For example, Salehi and Ghasemzadeh (2018) noted that though there are several factors that influence plagiarism, attitude of students is significant. Walker (2008) notes lack of training in paragraphing; Liu (2005) suggests insufficient language skills; Bettaieb et al. (2020) singles out the issue of lack of experience or knowledge on how to integrate sources within one's work; Devlin and Gray (2007) noted issues such as poor academic skills, personality factors and external pressures; while Park (2003) added other factors such as the need for a better grade, lack of time, regard for the act as clever and acceptable, and lack of deterring tools. Other researchers have noted that one's background can have a significant bearing on copying. For example, The Times (2016) notes that at one university, 75% of students from European Union countries were found plagiarising while from China, it was less.

Some students however, perceive plagiarism as a relatively minor offence (Park, 2003). Other researchers such as Harding et al. (2001) believe that factors that influence students to plagiarise can be categorised as demographic factors, societal and technological factors and situational factors. Some of the determinants that influence cheating among students were noted by Park (2003) as gender, age, academic ability, student social life, personality factors and risk of being caught. In a qualitative research by Riasati and Rahimi (2018), factors such as students' unawareness of

plagiarism, poor essay writing skills, linguistic disability, lack of interest in the topic, and social pressures were recognised as the most important causes of plagiarism. According to Ocholla and Ocholla (2016; 02), plagiarism thrives because “...there is a lack of knowledge (among students) of how to use information resources or other people’s information for teaching, learning and research, correctly or properly.”

Types of plagiarism/ Examples of plagiarism instances.

Plagiarism can be classified into different types. However, the types to be given below may not be exhaustive as newer strategies of plagiarising keep sprouting. In concurrence, Stephenson (2018) admits that ‘...new forms of plagiarism are constantly emerging.’ (Stephenson, *ibid*) points to several types of plagiarism, and these include unintentional/accidental plagiarism, illicit paraphrasing, aggregation, copy-paste, find-replace, mosaic/re-mix/shake and paste, pawn sacrifice/hybrid, self-plagiarism, 404 error, ghost writing/contract cheating/essay mills, translation and cloning. Below are the most common types of plagiarism:

i. Unintentional/ accidental plagiarism

A plagiarist can present as their own work/research, unbeknown to them that the same work/research would have been published by someone else. It may also be the case that the plagiarist may be unaware of the ethical considerations in academic practice (Stephenson, 2018), or fails to cite from the source properly (Roka, 2017); thus unknowingly committing unintended plagiarism. However, Roka (2017) points out that when the plagiarist intentionally or deliberately duplicates ‘...someone else’s text, paragraphs, data or idea and presents it as his own...’ this becomes intentional plagiarism.

ii. Aggregation

This is the kind of plagiarism whereby citations are provided, yet no originality in thought or content will be evident in the article/paper (Stephenson, 2018).

iii. Copy-paste

This is when texts, phrases or complete sentences are deliberately taken from the source and reproduced without attribution to the originator. According to Mutengwa (2017; 8), copy and paste plagiarism is whereby the plagiarist lifts ‘...sentences or phrases intact from a source without acknowledging its source.’ Roka (2017) posits that this type of malpractice is also referred to as *word-to-word plagiarism*; and goes on to point out that it may also include the reproduction of tables and pictures without acknowledging the source.

It should be noted that this type of plagiarism is very common, and is made easy by technological advancement and the ready availability of data on the World Wide Web. Without some inhibitive or controlling measures in place, any student can look up any material from the internet, copy it and then present it as his/her own.

iv. *Find-replace*

This is also referred to as word switch plagiarism, and it normally entails extracting a statement or sentence from a source (without acknowledging), then changing some or all the original words (Mutengwa, 2017). The Pennsylvania State University (2021) describes this type of plagiarism as stating someone else's ideas in one's own words.

v. *Mosaic/ Re-mix/ Shake and paste/ Patch writing*

This is done by extracting sentences, phrases or statements from the source; then replacing, reordering or rephrasing the words without giving due credit to the originator of the work (Roka, 2017; Pennsylvania State University, 2021). This kind of plagiarism is almost similar to *find-replace plagiarism*, as it entails intentionally altering key terms from the original source to avoid detection (Stephenson, 2018), but retaining its main idea). This type of plagiarism can as well be likened to the concept that Stephenson (2018) refers to as *illicit paraphrasing*, whereby the plagiarist paraphrases another author's work without acknowledging it.

vi. *Pawn sacrifice/hybrid*

According to Stephenson (2108), this type of plagiarism occurs when the writer plagiarises large extracts of material but only make citations for smaller parts of such material. This is normally done by students who have limited time or IQ to formulate their own ideas, thus they end up other theorists' ideas as theirs.

vii. *Self-plagiarism*

This type of plagiarism is also referred to as *recycling* (Roka, 2017; Stephenson, 2018). It basically means reproducing one's own work without the permission of the initial publisher or authority. For instance, an author can submit an article that contains the same material that would have been published by a different publisher/journal in an earlier article. Mutengwa (2017) considers self-plagiarism as the reproduction of an academic work without obtaining due consent from responsible authorities.

viii. *404 error*

This is whereby a writer quotes a non-existent source (Roka, 2017), or when the citations are inaccurate (Stephenson, 2018).

ix. Ghost writing/contract cheating/essay mills

According to Roka, (2017; 4), ghost writing is whereby ‘...the main contributor is not given due acknowledgement or someone who has not contributed is given due credit.’ Stephenson (2018) defines ghost writing as the writing of academic/professional material by a third part. This means that credit is rendered to the wrong individual. This malpractice has become rampant in Zimbabwe, with some registered companies overtly advertising their services (of ‘assisting’ both undergraduate and postgraduate students with assignments, projects or theses at a fee). Resultantly, credit (or a whole MPhil/DPhil is awarded to someone who never carried out any research, but only paid a third part for the services.

x. Translation

This occurs when material is extracted from its original source, then translated into another language for use in a secondary source, without due attribution to the originator/author (Stephenson, 2018).

xi. Cloning/purloining.

This is a more complex version of the simple copy-paste plagiarism. It involves the copying or regeneration of someone else’s ideas or thoughts from earlier publications or presentations, audio or video files without their knowledge, and presenting these as the plagiarist’s own (Roka, 2017; Stephenson, 2018). Admittedly, this kind of plagiarism is not easy to detect or deal with. Roka (ibid, 4) defines cloning as ‘submitting someone’s work, subscribed as the plagiarist’s own.’

xii. Source Plagiarism

Roka (2017, 3) defines this type of plagiarism as the use of ‘...an article’s citations without actually reading or cross-referencing the bibliography.’

Methodology

The research adopts a qualitative approach. While most researchers (Bettaieb et al., 2020; Sankar, 2020; Thomas & Zyl, 2012; Garwe, 2015; Marsden et al., 2005; Marshall & Garry, 2005) have taken a quantitative approach through the use of cross-sectional survey, the researchers decided to use a qualitative approach which was likely to offer deep insights into what motivates students to plagiarise.

The researchers first took a through document analysis of the marked work of students and then later on interviewed students based on the issues that had been picked from the plagiarism issues in the student's assignments.

This study used interviews and document analysis. Mahabeer & Pirtheepal (2019) also used interviews to assess the effect of plagiarism in South Africa. An interview guide was prepared and data was collected from a group of sampled students. This study purposefully selected fifty (50) Communication Skills undergraduate students (a university-wide course that is meant to accelerate students' communicative competence) assignments from level one (first year) students from various faculties. The University has five faculties specialising in science education, natural sciences, agricultural and environmental sciences, commercials and humanities. Ten (10) students were purposively sampled from each Faculty.

Document analysis involved findings from students' assignments and research projects and the academic integrity policies at the University. The researchers also purposefully picked fifty (50) assignments, ten (10) from each faculty. Assignments that were picked were those that contained obvious instances of plagiarism. In most cases, lecturers' comments guided the researchers in identifying plagiarised work. The following are examples of such comments:

Be original;

Not original;

Where did you get this?

Acknowledge the source;

URGENT!! Plagiarised work! Please see me together with ... (name of another student);

Where are you getting all this?

Stop plagiarising- acknowledge sources.

Please reference properly

Sources indicated in-text are not properly cited on references

However, there were some observable instances where the assessor missed that students had actually plagiarised. Such instances of plagiarism were camouflaged by aggressive paraphrasing and word re-ordering, such that the presented work would look and sound original.

Since the study was carried out when there was a COVID-19 pandemic and most students were studying online, the researchers interviewed them using online means through platforms such as ZOOM, Googlemeet and Social Media like Whatsapp. Participants would be invited into a group meeting where the interview questions were asked and each participant was given an equal opportunity to respond. Participation was voluntary and students were assured that their identities will not be revealed and their responses were to be used solely for research purposes. In order to improve the validity of the study, participants (students) were asked not to give their personal accounts. Students were also assured that no records of names will be taken or kept and no comments will be attributed to their names. They were also notified that the interviews were to be recorded and they gave consent. Responses were noted and recorded in note form and compilations of each group participants were sent back to them to ensure that correct transcribing was done.

Data analysis

The collected data was subdivided into themes and categories. Important quotations that could be recorded in this work were also noted. Each Faculty was given a Code from A-E. Participants were identified by their group.

Results and Discussion

The researchers first had a thorough document analysis of the marked work of students. Of the fifty purposively sampled assignments, six had serious instances of the copy-paste kind of plagiarism; whereby students submitted the exact copies of the same assignment. In some cases where there would be some minor differences, it would be mere paragraph shifting in one of the assignments. Copy-paste plagiarism was not only done amongst students themselves; other students copied material directly from the Internet and presented such, in its raw/unedited form, as their assignments. Since the studied assignments were in the form of hard copies, such instances were observable through the unfocused nature of the responses to the given questions, the wayward discourses and/or overly conversational language used (for example, some students copied from Internet articles (written in second person voice) that advised on assignment writing and presented such as their own work. For others it was the layout that exposed the plagiarism: the students would simply capture the material on the Internet and present it as obtained, sometimes in note form. Lecturers responded to such assignments by awarding zero credit in such cases students were issued with stern warnings and told to redo the work.

From the assessed assignments there were also some evidence of aggregation plagiarism, whereby students would indicate citations yet the material would have been their own. This was noteworthy through overly generalised statements, most of which were grammatically or syntactically faulty, and also through lack of evidence of originality of the ideas. This was evidently done to create an impression of having consulted sources, yet the presented ideas would be the student's own.

The research also established that ghost writing was another increasing type of plagiarism that students practise at BUSE. It was observed that mainly novice students outsourced expertise from their more experienced peers for their coursework in exchange of some fee or other favours. Apart from the researchers' own observations that indicated such instances, participants who were later interviewed also confirmed that they once assigned someone else to write their own work. This type of academic dishonesty is difficult to prove since the submitted work will in most cases be beyond reproach. The biggest challenge is that the actual student is assumed to have learnt the desired concepts yet in actual sense assessment would have been done on someone else's effort. Another challenge similar to ghost writing was the citation of non-existent authors. This was detected by questionable names that students cited and when further checks are done, no publications of such materials would be found.

From the interviews conducted, instances of plagiarism were observable mainly through incredibly rapid performance improvement on work of particular students who would have previously submitted rather unsatisfactory or mediocre work. This was observed over the course of a single semester by the researchers who made sustained effort to observe students' performance in their coursework. Upon comparatively analysing a number of such assignments, it was established that some learners have a tendency of 'outsourcing' expertise and thus 'subcontracting' other individuals to write their assignments. This was also confirmed by the increasing number of Internet and Social Media Platforms such as WhatsApp and newspaper adverts that offered 'assistance with assignment and dissertation writing.'

The participants indicated that they had studied plagiarism as a topic under the Communication Skills course mentioned above, yet they admitted that they had at some point practised plagiarism during their first year at university. When asked what they understood about plagiarism, most students proved to have only a very shallow/basic understanding of the concept, with limited responses such as: '*copying*', '*copying from the internet*' and '*not acknowledging sources.*' Some of the responses were as follows:

"I am not aware of it though I have heard about it from my lecturers"

"I found it difficult for me to explain it but I know it has something to do with copying"

The University has an Anti-plagiarism Policy which students were asked about. Responses were varied though they indicated unawareness of such

"We have never heard of it"

Our lecturers talk of plagiarism thresholds but I am not sure what percentage is regarded as plagiarism

No. I don't know that Policy

Is it here?, Ah. I am not aware

Participants were also asked to share their views regarding their knowledge of referencing conventions: One participant from group B said *"I know that there is APA but I am not sure of how to apply it in my work"*. Another one from Group D also showed the lack of skills in using referencing when they said *"Sources that we get from the Internet some have no dates of publication and I found it difficult when writing my reference sources"*. Another participant from Group A noted that a Librarian from the Library once showed her how to reference *"I was shown by the Librarian how to reference but I have forgotten about it"*. All participants from group E noted that they had challenges with the reference style. *"We need assistance on that. We still struggle to apply the reference style"*.

Students pointed various reasons for them having plagiarised: pressure due to limited time allocated to complete an academic task, numerous tasks simultaneously issued with same submission timelines, having no experience or adequate training in academic referencing, high level of difficulty of the assigned work, among others. When it came to the question of the goodness or badness of plagiarism, students' responses were varied; some chose the former, and others the latter. Some of the interesting response were from group A where a participant said *"Yes its bad but we will be thinking that the lecturers won't caught us"*, Another from group C had this to say *"But I would have tried to replace with my own words so I don't think it's bad"*, while another from group D also noted that *"If I take words of a definition of something, I don't think it's bad"*.

On measures that could be implemented to reduce the practice of plagiarism, some of the suggestions noted were, *"We need training by you the lecturers, sometimes we are just given an assignment when we are not sure of how to write it"* said a participant from group E. Another participant from the same group also noted about the need for further training in referencing styles *"...yes we might have been trained in referencing styles, but we still need continuous training"*. One response from Group B

participants showed that some lecturers are not worried about plagiarism “*you get other lecturers talking about it and giving you low marks but others even if you copy, they will give you good marks*”. The researchers further probed the participants on whether they know the anti-plagiarism detection tools available at the university and if at all they think such could solve the challenges of plagiarism. All participants from group A said they were not aware. Only one participant from group C noted that they had heard about it from library staff during orientation “*when we were oriented, the librarian mentioned about it but we are not sure of it*”.

Discussion

It can be deduced from the data gathered from conducted interviews that students’ understanding of plagiarism is rather limited, and that increased understanding could alter their attitudes towards the academic scourge. Devlin and Gray (2007) also noted from their study that lack of student awareness and poor academic skills are one of the major contributors towards plagiarism. Despite having studied plagiarism as a course topic, the participants showed a lack of adequate understanding not only of the concept, but also of its repercussions. Participants also showed a rather pathetic attitude towards plagiarism, with other respondents’ tone showing defined dislike on being interviewed on the topic, suggesting that the plagiarism was not a worthy cause for research. However, a few other participants admitted that plagiarism created half-baked professionals and also indicated that proper training on the use of information sources can minimise instances of plagiarism. Salehi and Ghasemzadeh (2018) noted that attitude can be a key determinant in influencing behaviour of individuals. Institutions can however control or influence such attitude by increasing awareness of copyright and intellectual property rights of individuals.

The reasons that were given by students as to why they plagiarise indicate that most students have difficulties managing their study time vis-à-vis other responsibilities. Most students mentioned the aspect of increased pressure owing limited time allocated to complete numerous tasks that are given with the same submission timelines. This was observable especially during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic whereby, following the World Health Organisation (WHO) and national stipulations, BUSE has embraced both on-campus (physical) and off-campus (virtual/online) teaching and learning. Some interviewed participants indicated that when learning from home time constraints affect them as they need to balance school work and home chores; whereas others also opined that some lecturers compress workload of the entire semester and deliver it during the few weeks of

physical learning, during which they also demand their coursework/assignments. This then compels students to plagiarise as it becomes a strategy to cope with the pressures imposed on them, albeit being unorthodox.

Conclusions and recommendations.

The study has indicated that BUSE, just like other many Higher and Tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe and the world at large are having challenges of plagiarism. Students are not aware of the consequences that plagiarism can have on the brand of the institution. Making students aware of plagiarism and its dangers is critical. Hosny and Fatima (2014) notes that increasing the awareness of students about the seriousness of this practices is essential. The reasons for plagiarism are varied. These include lack of time, lack of skills, attitude and unfamiliarity of referencing conventions. The researchers recommend that there is need for plagiarism to be given urgent attention so as to be minimised and thus being able to obtain competent and resourceful graduates. Thorough teaching and learning of the concept may alter learners' attitude. Lecturers can be at the fore-front of championing the reduction of plagiarism through quoting/revealing of cases of plagiarism during lectures and relieving learners of unnecessary pressure. The University Administration can also practice revocation of academic certificates particularly for serious plagiarism where students would have copied projects of theses. There is also need for the Library and the Information and Communication Technology Departments (ICT) to be actively involved in the training of referencing conventions and anti-plagiarism detection tools such as Turn-it-in. Libraries can actively support the deterring of plagiarism through revamping their curricula so as to focus more on information, digital and media literacy.

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